



# Population and Sustainability Network

**Population, Development and Poverty Reduction**  
**London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine,**  
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These seminars have so far tackled the critical issues of reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS, and different regional approaches. But this one looks at some of the obstacles concerning the role of Population Growth in the context of Sustainable Development and, most importantly, Poverty Reduction.



Left to right Catherine Budgett-Meakin, John Cleland (LSHTM) and Tim Dyson (LSE)

## The overarching concept of the Network— The Population Coin

**On one side of the coin**

unsustainable population increase and its social, economic and environmental effects in the majority world;



**On the other side**

unsustainable over-consumption of resources in the minority world and its effects on the development of sustainability.



I shall look at the background, the challenges and suggest some ways forward.

## The Background

There is a mistaken view that population growth is 'over' and no longer a problem. The table of statistics shows just how wrong that view is.

In the 1970s words such as 'population bomb' were used, and at the same time, policies and practices were put into place which sometimes abused, in particular, women's reproductive rights: population 'control' and coercion became widespread. We can all think of examples where behaviour was inappropriate and deeply regrettable. The effect of these policies was far reaching and continues to influence policies of mainstream development agencies even now, as they continue to distance themselves from that period.

The UN 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo broke the coercion mould: the emphasis moved from 'control' to 'reproductive rights', and a remarkable Programme of Action was developed, with broad support from the nations present, and a commitment undertaken to spend 17 billion dollars per year (a commitment which, incidentally, has never been fulfilled).

However there have been unforeseen results of that mould breaking conference: the issue of reproductive health and rights was 'adopted', not surprisingly, by the women's movement, and was reinforced in the Beijing Conference in 1995. The subject of reproductive health and rights were somehow divorced from sustainable development, and the word 'population' became almost, if not actually, taboo among those involved with service provision.

The many important and effective Reproductive Health organisations (for example, the International Planned Parenthood Federation, and Marie Stopes International) became somehow separated from the mainstream development agencies and seem, even now, to operate in a different and circumscribed world. The demographers also became excluded from reproductive health thinking.

## The Challenges

We are up against both taboo and denial – both inter-related: talking about population 'numbers' seems to be not permitted, indeed it's actually a taboo subject, in the NGOs of the minority world, and this taboo leads to denial that population growth is a factor, among many, that needs to be considered in the context of sustainability and poverty reduction.

A most recent manifestation of that taboo is seen in the change of name of the NGO Population Concern to Interact Worldwide: the organisation was finding that the word 'population' was hindering their fundraising, because 'concern' was being confused with 'control'.

There seems to be a gulf between the demographers (mostly men – who tend to focus on 'numbers') and those concerned with reproductive health and rights (mostly women): this is not helpful and adds to the taboo/denial scenarios. There is clearly an opportunity for these two 'population' sectors to increase communication, in the interests of poverty reduction and sustainability.

I used to work for the Intermediate Technology Development Group (now Practical Action), and if you had asked me then about the role of population in development I would have said "take care of poverty and population will take care of itself"; that is still the response of many British NGOs.

In the last four years I have learnt differently: what is needed is a two-pronged approach: work on developing sustainable livelihoods, small scale credit, appropriate technology and all the usual tools of the sustainable development process must proceed in tandem with resources allocated specifically to reproductive health services and family planning, so that, without coercion, and with proper recognition of women and men's reproductive rights, people can choose to space their children.

Given the opportunity and the proper facilities and reproductive technologies (including advice, information and support), almost always people (and especially women) will choose to have fewer children. The example of Bangladesh is often quoted: even though poverty has not noticeably been reduced, the birth rate has fallen (now 3.7 children per woman, as compared with 5.3 in Pakistan – figures from 2000). While this is still a high figure, it is lower than many other poor countries (see the table).

The other issue which should be mentioned is maternal mortality: the single most discrepant statistic between the majority and minority worlds. To get some idea of this, imagine a jumbo jet crashing every six hours – that's the number of women who die – that's about 1400 every day.

### **The people who die are:**

- NOT all at once in a jumbo every 6 hours, but
- in ones and twos
- in rural areas, and
- women, not men

As Kofi Annan said in Bangkok in December 2003: *'The Millennium Development Goals, particularly the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger, cannot be achieved if questions of population and reproductive health are not squarely addressed. And that means stronger efforts to promote women's rights, and greater investment in education and health, including reproductive health and family planning'*.

It is significant that there is no Millennium Development Goal (or MDG) specifically on reproductive health – this omission is largely because of the strength of the 'unholy alliance' of the Vatican, the American Christian religious right, and the Islamic world – who combine to produce extremely effective '**opposition**' at all the big UN events – I myself experienced this in the run up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002.

Attempts led by IPPF to add a ninth MDG on reproductive health at the Millennium Summit five year review in September this year have been abandoned because of anxiety that the 'opposition' will be mobilised and activated. Last year was the 10 year anniversary of the Cairo conference – in order that the text agreed in 1994 should not be weakened, there were no formal UN events to 'celebrate' that conference.

But it is also because, as I indicated above, of the reluctance of the key minority world organisations to consider the role of population growth in discussions about sustainability and poverty.

Among the main NGOs (Oxfam, Christian Aid, for example) while resources have been allocated generously to HIV/AIDS programmes, there remains real reluctance to allocate resources to reproductive health services or to confront the 'population growth' issue explicitly.

This reluctance can also be observed in the central development research/policy organisations such as the International Institute of Environment and Development and the Overseas Development Institute here in London – my efforts to develop some sort of dialogue have so far been unsuccessful.

There seems to be real squeamishness about talking about population growth. I must confess that I as a white British woman share something of this squeamishness but especially because of this, I firmly believe that it is we in the 'minority' world, with all our polluting and consuming ways that need to change our behaviour radically. Hence the two sides of our population coin.

This is the moment to describe briefly the rationale for our Network: it aims to bring population issues, explicitly, back on to the policy agenda of NGOs, governments and other policy organisations. The 24 members straddle the environment, development and reproductive health sectors. Two papers are available: on population issues as such, and on population and consumption.

### **Our Recommendations for Action are:**

- Population as an issue to be addressed became 'taboo' partly because of the perception that this was the minority world attempting to 'dictate' to the majority world. By proving that unsustainable rates of population increase hinder economic development and poverty alleviation, this perception can be reversed and population planning can become an instrument of empowerment for majority world countries.
- Within the research and policy environment, much more attention needs to be given to the effect of provision of adequate reproductive health care services on poverty eradication. Currently about 350 million couples lack access to adequate reproductive health services;

- Donor governments need to increase their allocation of funds to reproductive health services (it seems that funds to HIV/AIDS have been diverted from RH budgets). DFID is now taking this issue more seriously, but there is work to be done with other donor governments. The commitments made at ICPD in 1994 should be fulfilled.
- There should be more dialogue between those NGOs who focus on reproductive health and rights and the development and environment NGOs, and between those exploring policy issues in these areas.
- There should also be more dialogue between the demographers and reproductive health specialists.

## **Population growth, per capita consumption and the environment**

The newly published Millennium Ecosystem Assessment is clear that population growth and increased economic activity have done serious damage to farmlands, fisheries, water supply and other systems. A UN under secretary claimed that the assessment represents a consensus that the fragile nature of the planet's ecosystems requires urgent attention.

Climate catastrophe (largely caused by the consumption patterns and fossil-burning habits of those of us in the rich – or minority – world) is likely to come upon humanity everywhere in the world, with the poor suffering most, as they tend to live in more vulnerable and marginal areas, with more extreme weather events affecting fragile ecosystems. The 20% of us who live in the minority world consume 80% of the world's resources. That situation is neither just nor sustainable. If everyone in the world had our 'ecological' footprint, we would need about three planets, according to the WWF Living Planet Report.

So, if we want to do something about population growth we must also do something about per capita consumption.

**Not only do we need less fossil-fuel burning, we also need less fossil-fuel burners.**

**So on the population and per capita consumption side of our population coin, we need:**

- To develop a new economic model which values quality rather than quantity – the New Economics Foundation has done a great deal of work already on this idea;
- The promotion of One Planet Living – expansion of this idea into a blueprint for life for all;
- To develop a model of what living with 80% CO2 cuts (recommended by the Inter-Governmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC]) would mean;
- A communications strategy to explain the reasons for making changes, and an outline of the scenario if nothing is done – the likely impacts on future generations of inaction;
- The creation of cross parliamentary party support in Western democracies so that these issues are not seen as party political – to avoid the short-termism inherent in the system.
- To adapt the concept of Contraction and Convergence, developed by the Global Commons Institute (<http://www.gci.org.uk/>) to consumption.
- More attention needs to be given to the role of unsustainable consumption by rich populations in the minority world in hindering sustainability at individual and institutional levels.
- Particular attention needs to be given to climate change which, according to many observers, (NEF, the World Watch Institute and others) may mean the 'end of development': certainly the achievement of development goals is threatened, affecting the poorest sections of the population.

## **To Sum Up**

- **Development and environment NGOs and policy research organisations need to include population issues (both growth and per capita consumption) within their strategic plans: Both sides of the 'population coin' need to be an inescapable element in the sustainable development and poverty reduction equation.**